



Promoting a Folic Acid Education Program to Prevent Birth Defects

Public Health Problem

Data from West Virginia's CDC-supported Pregnancy Risk Assessment Monitoring System (PRAMS) for 1997 showed that 73.9% of women delivering a live-born infant were aware of the benefits of folic acid, but these women did not supplement their diet with a daily dose of folic acid before or during pregnancy.

Evidence That Prevention Works

Research indicates that 400 milligrams of folic acid taken every day by women of childbearing age can reduce the risk of brain and spinal cord (neural tube) defects by up to 70% when taken before and continued early in pregnancy.

Program Example

West Virginia used PRAMS data to develop the Folic Acid Education Project, which was conducted from July 1999 to December 1999. The purpose of the project was to increase public and professional awareness about the importance of using folic acid before pregnancy to prevent birth defects of the spinal cord and brain. Information about folic acid and its benefits was distributed to women of childbearing age throughout West Virginia through displays in health clinics and health fairs. A statewide toll-free number was also established to answer questions about the use of folic acid. In McDowell County, a southern rural county in the state, the education project was expanded to include the distribution of multivitamins. Multivitamins were distributed to family planning providers to be given out free of charge to participating women. By the conclusion of the project, 2,500 bottles of multivitamins containing folic acid had been distributed.

Implications

The folic acid education program may be expanded to increase private health care providers' awareness of the West Virginia Birth Defects Registry, a system established in 1989 to monitor the occurrence of birth defects among the state's children. The program demonstrates the importance of determining the effectiveness of awareness campaigns and the importance of timely and accurate data collection.